The moment of truth.

Sometime during the movie, Pam had moved closer, scooting over on the sofa until their thighs touched. Now she snuggled into him with a sigh. He put an arm around her.

They were alone in his efficiency apartment, relaxing with a DVD after having met at a restaurant for diner. The lights were off, wine glasses half-full on the coffee table. It had been just another one of the many calm and pleasant evenings Sean McKenzie had spent with Pamela Smith recently.

But can I do this? Sean asked himself. He licked his lips and swallowed, hoping she didn't notice. *I have* to, he concluded. *I simply have to!*

But Pam had noticed. She looked up at him, smiling. She was not very pretty, definitely not what you would call an alluring or sexual woman, but familiar. Comfortable. Mousy and plain. They had been working together at the customer service department of a software company for almost a year now; first becoming office friends, then outside-the-office friends, and tonight, maybe more.

"You okay?" Pam asked.

Sean nodded. He swallowed again, this time with an audible gulping sound.

Pam giggled. "Don't be nervous, Sean," she said, and gently placed a hand on the side of his face. "It's alright." She kissed him.

Steady, steady, Sean cautioned himself. He held her gently. Kissed her softly. It wasn't until she moved her tongue into his mouth that they shifted to make it more comfortable. He leaned back, she lay on top. They kissed some more.

Sean reciprocated but didn't advance the play. The kissing went on for a tediously long time, until Pam sat up and took off her shirt. Then, after a pause, her bra. The flickering light of the television played over her skin, making it look electric. Sean reached for her breasts, but stopped himself, trembling. Pam clutched his hand, fell into it, her nipple in the center of his palm. She kissed him hard, and Sean moaned deep in his chest.

She moved her mouth over his, then on his cheeks, neck, collar. She pulled him forward, enough to remove his shirt, and kissed his chest. His ribs. She shifted. She placed her head on his stomach. Her hand found the button on his jeans. She kissed him on the flesh between his navel and the waistband of his underwear.

NO! Sean's back stiffened. His body became ridged.

"Relax," Pam whispered. "I want to."

NO! Sean pushed her away forcibly, almost violently.

"Wha-?" Pam started, but Sean fell off the couch, knocking over the coffee table, spilling wine everywhere. Then, in a mad dash, he ran to the bathroom and slammed the door.

***

Behind the locked bathroom door, Sean sat cold and shivering on the floor next to the toilette. *NO!* his mind screamed again. Again and again. But he couldn't hold back the nightmare.

The floor drops away. He's submerged in water up to his collar. It is summer, after midnight, half-moon overhead. He's leaning against the hard edge of a swimming pool. Music plays somewhere far away; Cheap Trick's remake of Don't Be Cruel.

He is naked. The water is warm. His penis is rock hard, painfully hard; the special kind of erection where he'd already had at least one orgasm that night but was still up for more.

Before him, a figure rises from the water. Joanie Price. His girlfriend. She is alluring. She is sexy. She is drunk as hell; naked, laughing, swimming towards him. "I want to," she says.

He feels another change in his cock. He looks. It has turned into an eel, long and sinister. Hateful pale eyes glare at him; a mouth full of sharp, evil teeth gnash at his legs.

Joanie Price is on him now, rubbing her slippery body against his. "I want to," she says again. She bites his ear then slides down until her head is underwater.

The song continues, but the lyrics are wrong:

Don't be cruel

ooo-OOO-ooo

To a mouth that's full

Sean tries to focus on something else, the moon, the hard edge of the swimming pool, the music.

But he can't stop himself from looking down.

And seeing the bloated, water-logged face of his dead girlfriend; eyes gone, replaced with yellow jelly, green seaweed for hair, strips of bloodless flesh floating away from the contours of her skull.

With lips like worms clamped around his penis, bobbing in the currents.

***

The sound of a door closing jolted Sean from the nightmare. "Pam!" he moaned, then scrambled to his feet. "Oh, Pam!" Sean raced through his apartment, out the door, down flights of stairs where he caught up with her. "Pam...," he said, standing a few steps above her. His voice and demeanor were pathetically, agonizingly desperate.

"Sean, I...," Pam couldn't meet his eyes. She looked at her feet. "I think I'd better just...."

In a flash, Sean brushed past her fell to his knees at her feet. He gripped her around the thighs, causing her to grab the rail for balance. He pressed his cheek against the front of her pants and a torrent of pleading words, punctuated with sobs, flew from his mouth. How he needed her, how she couldn't leave, how she was so lovely, how sorry he was, and, at the end....

How he loved her so.

Pam used two fingers to lift his chin so she could see his eyes. Tears streamed freely down his face. He was dripping wet with sweat and his chest heaved with emotion.

"Come on," Pam helped him to his feet.

"You'll stay?" Sean asked.

Pam bit her lower lip. She looked over his shoulder and saw the short hallway leading to the exit. She took a deep breath. "Yes, I'll stay," she said, holding his hand as they ascended the stairs together.

***

In the parking lot of the apartment complex, a man sat in a car watching the windows; one in particular. When he saw that window go dark, he checked the time. Then he looked towards the exit expectantly. Minutes passed with no activity and the man made a clucking sound. He settled back in the chair and waited.

***

At the first light of dawn, the man used his cell phone:

"Mr. Price? Sorry about the hour, but you said.... Yes... yes, she stayed the night. She's still with him, in fact. ... Yes, I have her name, contact information, all that.... Email address, yes. I'll text it to you now. ... Okay, Mr. Price. Did you still want me to...? Yes, sir."

The man disconnected his phone and opened a laptop computer sitting on the passenger's seat. He started typing.

***

"Come in," Mr. Silverberg said. "Sit down."

Sean took a seat. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Silverberg sat behind a tidy desk; a wireless computer setup on the corner, stacks of paper neatly dispersed over the surface. He used two fingers to tap a small collection of paper placed in the dead center of his desk and grimaced. Then he shook his head.

"Something wrong, sir?" Sean asked. Leaning forward to see what was on the papers, but Mr. Silverberg snatched them away.

"How long have you worked here, Sean?" he asked, nervously rolling the papers into a tube so Sean couldn't see any text.

"I guess a year. Almost a year. Why?"

Mr. Silverberg cleared his throat. "This is not easy, but... well... I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go."

Sean hung his head. His whole body deflated. He knew then what had happened.

"I'm sorry, Sean," Mr. Silverberg continued. "But I... I.... Are you going to be okay?"

"No," Sean answered honestly.

"I take it you know, then, what is on these papers?"

Sean nodded.

"Well. I should tell you, I've consulted our legal department and, although you did admit to having a criminal record on your application, the way you framed the specifics of your offense were such that it could be perceived as being dishonest."

"Don't worry. I won't....," Sean let the words die.

"I wouldn't think you would." Mr. Silverberg set the papers back down, no need to hide them now. "It might be for the best if you just give me an address where I can mail your personal items. That way you can just leave."

Sean took the hint. He stood up and made for the door. When his hand was on the knob, Mr. Silverberg said, "Whoever emailed me these documents cc'd Pam Smith and some of your other co-workers as well. I thought you should know."

Sean nodded. He expected that. After all, this had happened before.

***

Wilson Price was waiting for Sean at a booth in the corner. A handsome gentleman, showing signs of age in his hair and eyes, Wilson saw Sean enter the dinner and his demeanor instantly became dower. His brow furrowed, the corners of his mouth fell; nostrils opened, and his spine grew rigid. From handsome to morbid within one moment of recognition. *Fuck him anyway,* Sean thought. He smiled and waved then weaved his way through the dinner, occasionally bumping into chairs and tables, until he managed to settle himself into the opposite bench of the booth.

"Wilson," Sean said. "So nice to see you."

Wilson made to leave. "Where you going?" Sean demanded, grabbing his arm.

An expression of rage and hatred flared over Wilson's face; his eyes bulged, flesh glowed crimson. His lips drew away from teeth and he snarled. Sean couldn't help but release his grip and recoil.

"You're drunk," Wilson replied, disgusted.

"Can you blame me?" It took a moment, but when his own words struck him, Sean laughed. "Of course... of course you can blame me. Of course.

"But please." Sean patted the air with his hands. "Sit down."

Slowly, Wilson obliged. He said, "You called me here, I assume, to beg?"

"And you came, I assume, to tell me to go fuck myself."

That made Wilson smile. "We understand each other."

Sean just looked sad. "No. We don't," he said.

A waitress approached. The two men affected civility long enough to order coffee. When she left, Wilson said, "Beg now, if that's the plan. Otherwise, I'm going."

"No. No begging. I called you here to tell you you won."

Wilson worked this over for a moment then said, "It isn't a game, Sean. I can't win. Not until you're dead. As dead as Joanie."

"Exactly." Sean rested the back of his head against the bench cushion and shut his eyes. When he exhaled, Wilson smelled whiskey.

The waitress came with a carafe and two mugs, then left. Neither man poured.

Wilson leaned across the table. "What are you saying?"

"I'm going to kill myself. Tonight. You win."

Wilson let that sit for a while. He prepared coffee for himself; not to drink, just to have something to do. Finally, he said, "I'm from Missouri."

Sean opened his eyes, confused. He shook his head. *What does that have to do with anything?*

"The show me state," Wilson explained.

Sean laughed. "Ex. Act. Ly." He got up. "That's why you're here. Come on," he fished in his pocket for car keys and slammed them on the table. "You drive."

***

Sean gave directions. Wilson drove.

Sean finished a bottle during the trip, then opened another. He drank deep.

"We were both drunk that night," he said. Wilson didn't respond. Sean continued. "But I wasn't so drunk that I... that I...,"

"Stop," Wilson commanded.

Sean ignored him. "I let her go. As soon as I noticed she wasn't moving. I let her go. I didn't hold her there. I didn't."

Wilson's knuckles turned white from gripping the steering wheel. He cut his eyes at Sean and hissed, "Shut up now."

"It was like they said at trial. She... passed out. Drunk. It happens. It could've happened to anyone." Sean wiped his eyes. Then, remembering the bottle, took another long drink.

Wilson sped up.

***

The journey concluded at a community center located on the outskirts of a small town. Sean told Wilson to drive around back. He pulled the car up to a swimming pool protected by a meager six-foot-tall chain link fence.

"So that's your plan," Wilson said. He nodded approvingly. "Suitable."

"You want to watch?" Sean asked.

"Of course," Wilson replied.

They exited the car together. Wilson approached the fence as if to scale it, but Sean beckoned him to the gate. It was open.

"I did my homework," Sean explained. "They never lock this place. And no cops. It's mostly a retirement community. Come on."

Sean stood at the edge of the pool. He took another drink. "In case you're worried," he said, "I wrote a note, so they'll know this is suicide. You won't be arrested for murder. Heh. Not even reckless endangerment."

"I could do six months," Wilson retorted; six months being the amount of time Sean had served on a four-year sentence for reckless endangerment.

"Yeah," Sean agreed. "I'll bet you could. How many years have you been after me? Never letting me get close to anybody? Never letting me keep a job? Never, ever letting me forget?"

"Boo hoo." Wilson sat on a chaise lounge, waiting.

"She wanted to." Sean ignored the comment. "I didn't... want to? No, of course, that's not right. Of course, I wanted to, but I didn't care that much. We'd already had sex. A few times. Even in the water, standing up. Then she said she wanted to blow me. Underwater. She wanted to try it. You can't say no to that. How can you say no to that?"

Behind Sean, Wilson sat on the chair and fumed. He literally shook with rage. "That's my sister you're talking about."

"But I didn't hold her there," Sean continued regardless. "I guess I maybe had my hands on her head; like you would. But I wasn't... forcing her. And when she stopped, I let go. I even pushed her away, you know, because I figured she'd need air, but she just stayed there. Underwater. Her eyes were still open. Looking at me."

Wilson was off the chair now; standing with his hands balled into fists.

Sean turned towards him. "What you don't understand, Wilson, is that I am and always have been innocent. Joanie was reckless and thoughtless, and she used me. I'm the real victim here."

"Liar!" Wilson exploded. "You killed her. There is no way she just... just.... No, you had to have held her there. She must have struggled. Nobody could possibly be that drunk to... to...." Wilson couldn't bring himself to finish the thought.

"Drown herself with a dick in her mouth?" Sean offered.

Wilson swung a fist. With the luck of a drunk, Sean weaved away from the blow and lashed out with the whiskey bottle. It connected hard on the side of Wilson's head. He collapsed at Sean's feat.

Sean stood there for a moment, catching his breath. "Well, shit," he said. And took another drink.

***

Wilson Price regained consciousness to find his hands and feet had been bound to one of the swimming pool's access ladders. It was at the four-foot depth marker. Yards of duct tape had been used to secure wrists and thighs to the aluminum rungs. It was painfully awkward; his knees twisted inward, and the tops of his feet scraped the bottom of the pool.

He was submerged up to his chest, the water line just above nipple.

His pants and underwear had been removed.

Sean sat on the opposite edge of the pool, splashing with his feet, singing *Don't Be Cruel* while waving a near-empty whiskey bottle overhead like a lighter at a concert; clearly drunk beyond reason.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Wilson demanded. He struggled against the tape, but there was too much of it to break.

"Proving you wrong, Missouri," Sean replied. He finished the last swallow from the bottle, tossed it aside, then jumped in the water. "Proving you WRONG!"

"Wait.... Wait...," Wilson tried to stop him, but Sean came towards him, slowing descending as he approached.

"...*to a mouth that's full*...," Sean sang, then snorted laughter.

Lower and lower he sank as he approached. Wilson cried out for help.

Up to his chin now, Sean was close enough to touch as he treaded water before Wilson.

"I *want* to," Sean hissed. And then submerged his head.

Wilson stopped yelling for help with a sudden gasp.

End

Cheap Trick have always, and will always, be there. Omnipresent, like the oceans. Amen. However, I've retained one peculiar memory over these many long years: 1988, I'm living in a suburb just south of St. Louis attending my sophomore year of high school. I join a group of friends to visit one of those traveling carnivals that pop up overnight and are gone in a week. Gaudy stuff. All glaring lights and raucous sounds. Lord help me, how I loved it so!

Anyhoo, the carny running the tilt-a-whirl had a boombox cassette player by his feet next to a box of tapes. When we passed by, he was treating the rubes to the sounds of Billy Squire.

Meh. You only notice the music because it's so much different than the calliope cacophony surrounding other rides. And then you spot the carny, smoking a cigarette, wordlessly directing people on and off the ride, lazily working the lever. Just doing his job, waiting for another Saturday night to be over.

Crazy! Man, if I worked at a carnival every night would be a party and you wouldn't be able to knock the smile from my face with a sledgehammer!

It took us awhile to make the rounds, but eventually we pass that way again. This time I hear a deep cut off Cheap Trick (1977). Mandocello*. I must stop and admire the selection. The carny notices. He looks at me. His face is still a study in bored neutrality, but now I realize.... He's a teen; not much older than I am.*

There was probably a lesson in there somewhere, but I still haven't figured it out yet.